

What Is Earth Science?

Key Ideas

- Describe two cultures that contributed to modern scientific study.
- Name the four main branches of Earth science.
- Discuss how Earth scientists help us understand the world around us.

Key Terms

Earth science
geology
oceanography
meteorology
astronomy

Why It Matters

Earth scientists help us understand our place in Earth's history and in the universe. They can also help us gain access to Earth's resources and use these resources wisely.

For thousands of years, people have looked at the world around them and wondered what forces shaped it. Throughout history, many cultures have been terrified and fascinated by seeing volcanoes erupt, feeling the ground shake during an earthquake, or watching the sky darken during an eclipse.

Some cultures developed myths or stories to explain these events. Modern science searches for natural causes and uses careful observations to explain these same events and to understand Earth and its changing landscape.

The Scientific Study of Earth

Scientific study of Earth began with careful observations. Scientists in China began keeping records of earthquakes as early as 780 BCE. The ancient Greeks compiled a catalog of rocks and minerals around 200 BCE. Other ancient peoples, including the Maya, tracked the movements of the sun, the moon, and the planets at observatories like the one shown in **Figure 1**. The Maya used these observations to create accurate calendars.

For many centuries, scientific discoveries were limited to observations of phenomena that could be seen with the unaided eye. Then, in the 16th and 17th centuries, the inventions of the microscope and the telescope made seeing previously hidden worlds possible. Eventually, the body of knowledge about Earth became known as Earth science. **Earth science** is the study of Earth and of the universe around it. Earth science, like other sciences, assumes that natural events, or phenomena, can be explained through careful observation and experimentation.

Figure 1 El Caracol, an observatory built by the ancient Maya of Central America, is one of the oldest known observatories in the Americas. Mayan calendars include the celestial movements that the Maya tracked by using observatories.

Earth science the scientific study of Earth and the universe around it.



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